Working Together to Save Lives

Story by
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Twenty thousand are feared dead. More than 60,000 are injured. Estimates report that 70 percent of houses have been destroyed. Roads are damaged. Railways are destroyed. Devastation is vast.

Fortunately, for the people of Central Asia, this 7.0 magnitude earthquake was only a scenario which occurred during a workshop in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in May.

Delegations from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, the Partnership for Peace Information Management Systems, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers gathered in Tajikistan's capitol to prepare for a natural disaster.

The earthquake threat is very real for the people of Central Asia. The earth shakes to some degree almost daily, and their big earthquakes can make the San Andreas Fault's movement look like a mere hiccup.

Seismologists, engineers, meteorologists, geologists, Geographical Information Systems specialists and others participated in two, one-week-long seminars culminating into the application of an earthquake scenario with one goal in mind – to save lives.

The concept of getting nations together to work cooperatively is nothing new. In the fall of 2002 a similar seminar was conducted in Athens, Greece, which also used an earthquake scenario because of their prevalence in that part of the world, said retired Lt. Gen. Robert Flowers, former commanding general, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Nine countries that had never worked together conducted an emergency preparedness seminar, said Flowers.

In this area, the exercise paid big dividends because less than a year later, some of those earthquakes did occur.

"It worked out very, very well," said Flowers, "and I've seen some similar programs work in Africa, the Balkans, a lot of the former Soviet Republics and in Central and South America.

"It is a great program that is growing and will hopefully continue to grow," he said.

The program has even grown since last year when two of these programs were conducted, with one being in Azerbaijan and the other in Bulgaria, said David MacPherson, project manager, Civil Military Emergency Preparedness, International Engineering Center, Europe District. For 2004 the plan is to conduct seminars in four areas (up from last year's two) to include the one in Tajikistan, but also in Estonia, Armenia and the Republic of Georgia.

One of the main things that came out of this conference, which will help lead to the saving of lives, was the communication that was established between the participants, said Col. Habibullo Latipov of the Ministry of Emergency Situation and Civil Defense for the Republic of Tajikistan.

Over the past decade the Central Asia states have made various agreements and amendments pertaining to emergency relief, Latipov said.

It is the communication between the conference's participants that makes these summits so important.

SAVING LIVES

TOP: Teri Alberico (right) shows, Akmal Akhmedov (center) and Zohir Mullomalikov Geospatial Information Systems technology.

BOTTOM LEFT: Sobit Negmatoullaev, Institute of Earthquake Engineering and Seismology for the Republic of Tajikistan, discusses the different programs Tajikistan uses to study earthquakes and programs they have put into place based on the engineers' findings with Capt. Derek Ulelha (top, right), Teri Alberico (bottom, right), and Col. Karl Frantz (bottom, left), in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A woman performs a traditional dance in a Tajikistan tea house.

"Direct communication, face-to-face, is the best way to share information, knowledge, experience and culture," said Teri Alberico, planning, programs and project management division, Enterprise Geospatial Information Systems, St. Paul District.

Alberico shared her experiences with a GIS working group of delegates who had a variety of backgrounds at the conference. This provided a forum for the delegates to learn about another software, to share information on how they do GIS, share contact information with other GIS users and to work together to identify typical GIS data needs and products for emergency response.

"(GIS) is a very collaborative science, especially with regard to the acquisition of data," said Alberico. "There will be bumps

in the road … but with a common goal like emergency response the region's GIS users will likely be doing a lot of work together."

And programs such as the one conducted in Tajikistan are already in the plans for following years.

"We should have a steady program next year of three or four more programs in different areas and continuation of work in Central Asia," said MacPherson, which includes the continuation with the regions of Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova. These events are all a part of the Partnership for Peace program, which is sponsored under NATO.

These programs are important because of the information exchange between the different countries, which has lead to an increased amount of international cooperation. This cooperation, MacPherson said, is something that can be seen whenever one of these events is hosted.

Teri Alberico takes time to purchase goods from a vendor in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

Since 1993, there has been an agreement between these Central Asian countries about cooperating with each other, said Latipov.

"Thanks to this program we will reach a more worldwide level," said Latipov, and the work being done through this program, along with the goals and the objectives that have been set up, have opened many doors.

"We have the possibility to communicate and interact with the different nations and other CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and NATO countries.

"It is a necessity of future cooperation. It is necessary to continue exchanging information based on the knowledge we've received during this (workshop)," said Latipov.

This cooperation is part of the twofold program.

"We're helping them to help themselves," said MacPherson, "for them to build their emergency preparedness capabilities and call upon their neighbors. The second part is that we're working with the defense attaché of the host nations to continue to build programs of possible involvement through our International Engineering Center."

Over the years, engineers in the United States have learned a lot and gained much experience when it comes to disaster issues. "We're able to take that experience and translate it in a way that can help other countries prepare better for any kind of disaster," said Flowers.

For Flowers, it is these types of interactions that make a big difference "(by) improving the quality of life for people because of the way that their nations can respond following a disaster."

Love, Marriage and DEPLOYMENT

A Civilian Couple Answers the Call for Engineers in Iraq, Learning about Themselves and the Warfighters They Serve

Story by
Andrew Stamer

It was sold as an adventure of a lifetime, all-inclusive bragging rites to their colleagues, and the possibility to take a job and make a big difference.

While it could have been anywhere in the world, for Jason and Christina Bohrmann of Europe District, Iraq was where they were needed.

After hearing colleagues share their experiences with the Forward Engineer Support Team, Christina and Jason's interests were peaked. But what cinched the deal for this young couple was the chance to experience it together. Christina to be sent as part of the last FEST Augmentation as a computer aided drafting technician, and Jason, a civil engineer, to be part of the area office, both to be stationed at Camp Anaconda, about 50 kilometers north of Baghdad, near Balad, Iraq.

It was the opportunity they had been looking for, especially since both had been hearing about the experiences their civilian and military predecessors had while serving a tour.

"You've got all the previous FEST teams going and then you hear about their stories and you hear about what they've accomplished, and it seems like maybe we too can do some good and do what they've done," said Jason.

"And have a little

adventure at the same time," he added

And adventure was what they got before they even left for Iraq.

"We went together, but not together," said Jason. "We were both supposed to be on the FEST team … she was put into the area office and I would be on the FEST team, then a week later it was switched around."

It was a very busy and frustrating time because changes kept occurring right up until the last minute when they got on the plane, said Christina.

Because Jason had to finish a project, he didn't leave Germany until two weeks after Christina had left. But he soon arrived in Iraq and the plan of working and being with each other in Iraq was coming together.

So there they were in Iraq, a husband and a wife, there to lend moral support to each other. Certainly it couldn't be that much different than their life in Germany they had left for the time being.

"We knew what was up before we went down," said Christina. "We were asked if we'd be OK living separately."

Learning from the previous team's experiences — sharing an open barracks room — living in separate trailers wasn't so bad for the couple, even if it did feel slightly awkward for them to be separated.

"We had agreed to these rules beforehand so we didn't have much to complain about," said Jason.

But the reason for this separation had a purpose. It was to keep at least one of the family members safe in case of an aerial attack.

They were just as susceptible to attacks as the military personnel at the camp. They wore the Desert Combat Uniform alongside the Soldiers, and were also decked out in boonie caps.

"We were all there for a reason so they didn't treat us any different," said Christina. "A lot didn't even realize we were civilians."

They were treated as if they were Soldiers, something that shocked them at first because they weren't used to it.

"I got yelled at one time because I didn't salute somebody," said Christina.

After awhile, it was something that didn't bother them. It was almost an expected part of

Photo by Christina Bohrmann

Jason Bohrmann takes measurements of an existing clam shell building for another project around Camp Anaconda.

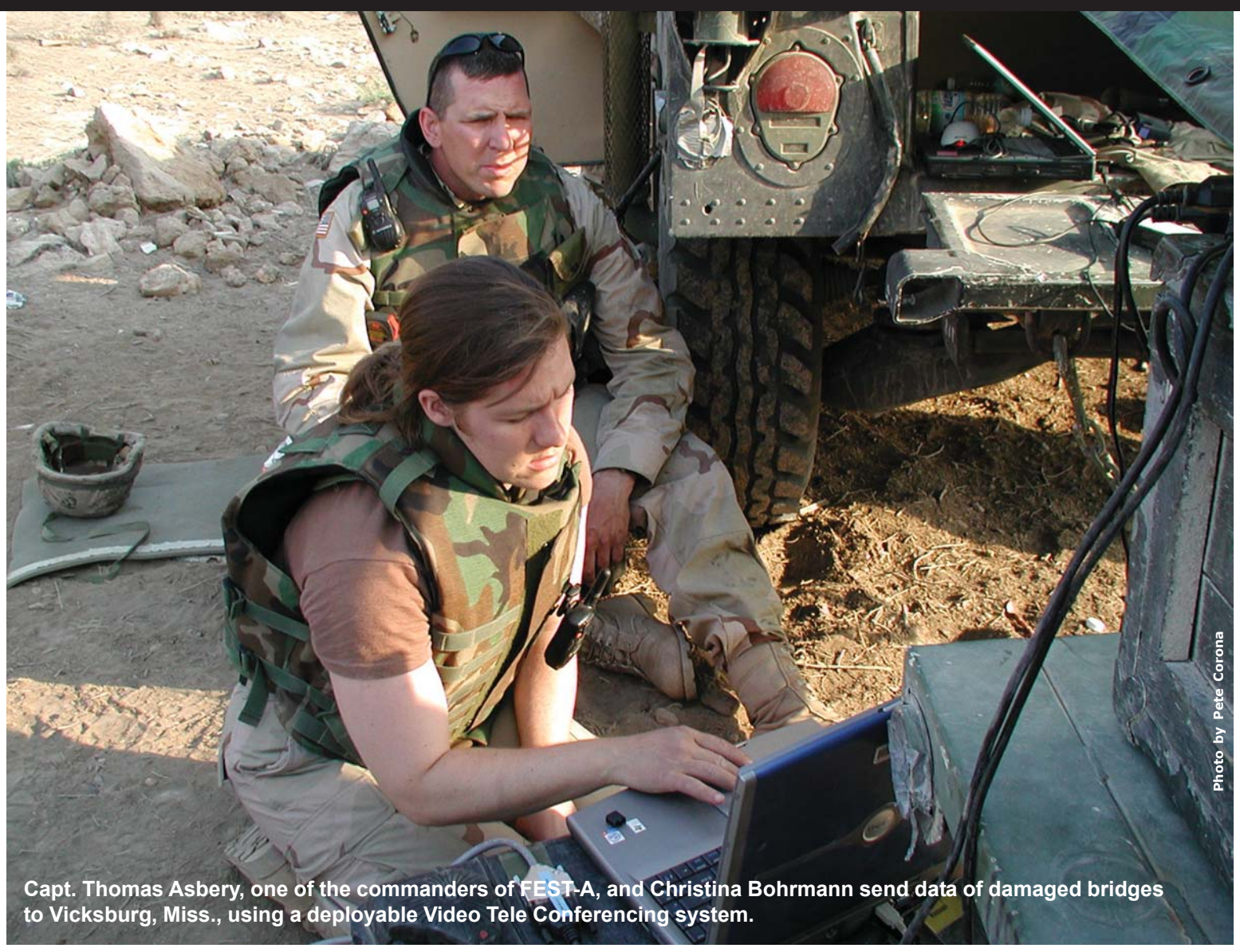

Photo by Pete Corona

Capt. Thomas Asbery, one of the commanders of FEST-A, and Christina Bohrmann send data of damaged bridges to Vicksburg, Miss., using a deployable Video Tele Conferencing system.

everyday life, they learned.

It wasn't just saluting that was confusing — it was being saluted. Confusion caused by the Corps of Engineers emblem, the castle, they wore on their headgear.

"At a distance … it looks like the captain rank," said Jason.

The confusion makes sense. Their desert camouflage was the same as the Soldiers, and the flak vests they wore covered up the only identifier that said they were civilians.

It was just one of many things they had to overcome as civilians working in a military environment that they were not used to.

Of the things they had to overcome, one of the strangest, was being in a situation where they were constantly on alert of being attacked.

When they first arrived, people at the camp told them that attacks had been dwindling down, said Jason.

Before heading off to Iraq, Christina had been in contact with members of the third FEST and they had been telling her they hadn't heard any attacks in the previous month. This was a good sign for Christina.

"In my mind … (the Army had) been there almost a year, things were going to be so much better," she said.

Images of peace in her mind were soon changed while sitting in a force protection briefing on her third day in country. Sirens sliced the air with a nerve-racking scream.

There were close to 40 people in the same briefing. No one reacted.

"I didn't know what the siren meant, but I was thinking, 'This can't be good,'" Christina said.

This was her first experience with a mortar attack.